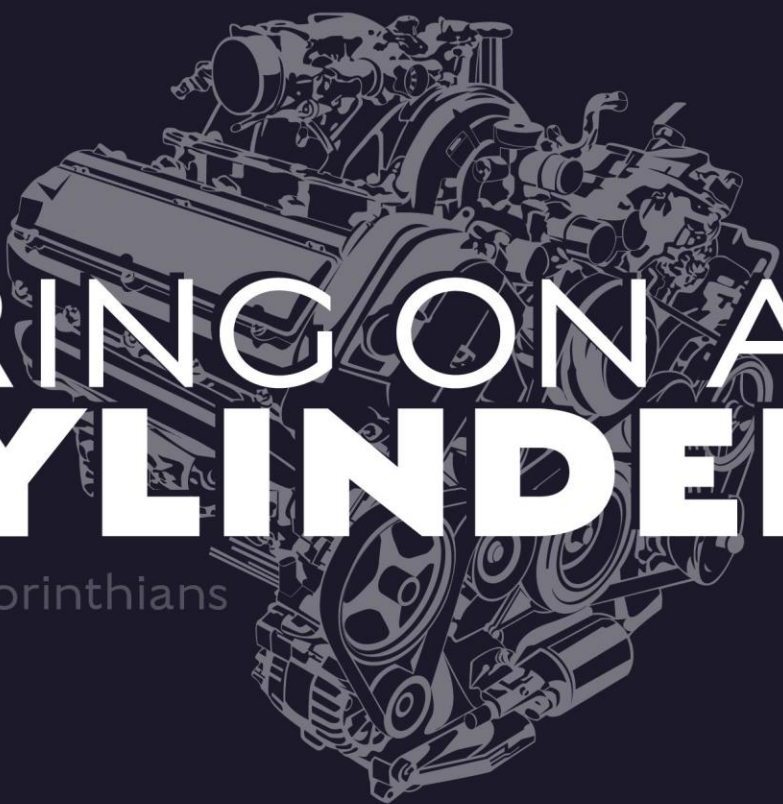




villagebible.church/cylinders

A detailed, stylized illustration of a car engine, shown from a front-three-quarter view. It features various components like the intake manifold, carburetor, and belts. The engine is rendered in a light gray color, matching the background.

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

I Corinthians

SMALL GROUP LESSONS

PACKET I

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LESSON 1 | Firing on All Cylinders3

LESSON 2 | United, Not Divided11

LESSON 3 | Wise Fools 17

LESSON 4 | The War of Wisdoms24



Firing on All Cylinders

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

There's nothing more satisfying than when something is "firing on all cylinders" – whether it's your car's engine, how you feel after a good night's sleep and cup of coffee in the morning, when your team at work is functioning at peak performance, or when your team finally wins the championship.

Meanwhile, there's nothing more frustrating than when something is 'running on fumes' – whether it's your car's engine sputtering, how you feel after a restless night and no caffeine in the morning, when your team at work is struggling to meet deadlines, or when your team hits a cold streak and can't get back on track.

In the same way, being part of the church can reflect those same extremes. When a church is "firing on all cylinders" it's a powerful, life-giving community of believers where people feel connected, cared for, and spiritually nourished. God's people are unified and working in harmony with each other, each using their gifts and passions to serve one another and the Lord. Needs are met; lives are changed. There's nothing quite like it.

But when the church is sputtering or running on fumes, people feel discouraged, disconnected, and perhaps, outright disappointed with the dysfunctions in the church.

Sometimes our experience in church resembles the latter and while we might be tempted to ditch the church and shop around for a better one, 1 Corinthians will show us how we can work to get the church "firing on all cylinders" again.

1 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a broken and dysfunctional church that was clearly not "firing on all cylinders". They were a church that was "not lacking in any gift" yet they found themselves sputtering with various forms of conflict within the church and compromise with culture outside the church.

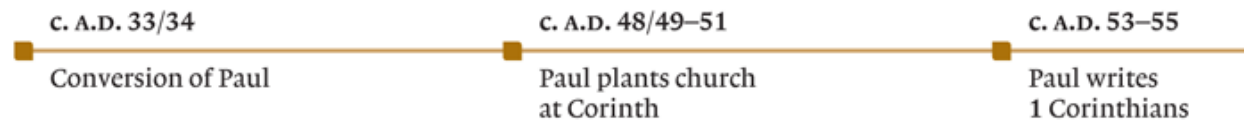
One commentator described the situation in Corinth like this: "The best explanation for the problems in Corinth is that the church was affected by the secular world, by the paganism and worldliness that was endemic in Corinth. ... What we do see is that the Corinthians were inclined to throw in their lot with the values and culture of secular society. ... The first letter to the Corinthians speaks to us today because the problems addressed still afflict us. Believers are tempted to fawn on the rich, to hobnob with the elite, to curry favor with the powerful and to acclaim intellectuals."¹

May we heed God's Word to His Church and work together as we pursue the edification of the church, striving to be a church that is "Firing on all Cylinders" in our mission to be a light in the world.

¹ Schreiner, Thomas R.. 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Book 7) (p. 48). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

Timeline



Author, Date, and Recipients

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church in the spring of A.D. 53, 54, or 55. This was near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus. Altogether Paul wrote four letters to this church: (1) the previous letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9; (2) 1 Corinthians; (3) the tearful, severe letter mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:3–4; and (4) 2 Corinthians. Only 1 and 2 Corinthians have survived.

Theme

The Corinthian church, divided because of the arrogance of its more powerful members, should work together for the advancement of the gospel. They should repent of their rivalries, build up the faith of those who are weak, and witness effectively to unbelievers.

Purpose

Paul received an oral report and a letter from the Corinthian church. These revealed a church struggling with division, immorality, idolatry, and theological confusion. He wrote them this letter so that they would become a true dwelling place for God's Spirit (3:12, 16), stay faithful to the gospel, and be "guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:8).

Key Themes

1. The church is the dwelling place of God's Spirit. Thus, the people who make up the church should work for unity by building each other up (1:10–4:21, especially 3:10–16; 14:12).
2. Christians should build up the church in four practical ways:
 - a. they should be sensitive to those with fragile faith (8:1–9:18; 10:28, 33).
 - b. they should win unbelievers to the faith (9:19–23; 10:27, 32–33).
 - c. they should conduct worship services in such a way that unbelievers might come to faith (14:16, 23–25).
 - d. their corporate worship should use spiritual gifts not out of personal pride, or for evaluating who has the better gift, but to build up the church (11:2–16; 12:12–30; 14:1–35).
3. Sexual relations form a union between man and woman as deep as the union of the believer with Christ. Therefore sexual activity should be confined to marriage (5:1–13; 6:12–20; 7:5, 9, 36).
4. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are important. Yet both are less important than personal trust in the gospel and living in the way God commands (1:14–17; 10:1–5; 11:17–34; 15:29–34).
5. The bodily resurrection of Jesus (and of his followers) from the dead is a key truth of the Christian faith (6:14; 15:1–58).

Outline

1. Introduction to the Letter's Main Themes (1:1–9)
2. Divisions over Christian Preachers (1:10–4:21)
3. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Lawsuits (5:1–6:20)
4. Three Issues from the Corinthians' Letter (7:1–11:1)
5. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2–14:40)
6. The Futility of Faith If the Dead Are Not Raised (15:1–58)
7. The Collection for the Saints and Travel Plans (16:1–12)
8. Closing Admonitions and Greetings (16:13–24)

The Setting of 1 Corinthians

c. A.D. 53–55

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians during his third missionary journey, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:21–22). Both Corinth and Ephesus were wealthy port cities steeped in pagan idolatry and philosophy. Corinth benefited both militarily and economically from its strategic location at one end of the isthmus that connected the southern Greek peninsula to the mainland.²



BREAK THE ICE

Can you share a time when you were part of a group, project, or activity that was 'firing on all cylinders'? What made everything work so well together, and how did it feel to be a part of it?

² From <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-1-corinthians/>

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

EXPLORE IT

1. How does Paul describe the recipients? (v. 2)
2. What reasons does Paul give for thanking God for the Corinthians? (v. 4-9)
3. How does Paul describe the spiritual gifts and enrichment the Corinthians have received? (v. 5-7)
4. What does Paul say has been confirmed in the Corinthian church? (v. 6)
5. How does Paul describe the Corinthians' anticipation of Jesus' return? (v. 8)
6. What assurances does Paul give about God's faithfulness to the Corinthian church? (v. 9)

APPLY IT

Growing up playing sports I was always taught “there’s no ‘I’ in team” (shame on those of you who say there is a “me”). Within this vein of team mentality was the idea that you are as strong as your “weakest link.” This wasn’t meant to belittle or malign the weaker players on the team, but to spur the stronger players to push and develop their teammates.

In this letter, Paul addresses some of the shortcomings and failures that characterized people in the Corinthian church. No doubt some of these struggles weren’t experienced by every individual member of the church, yet Paul’s admonition is for the body as a whole. Why? Because you win as a team and you lose as a team. When one of us struggles, we bear the responsibility to care for, correct, and carry one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:1-2). As a church, we are a team!

7. What is your typical response to topics or teachings that you don't feel apply directly to you?

8. What threats might you unknowingly welcome into your own life and into our church community by adopting an individualistic mindset toward teaching on topics or struggles that you don't feel apply directly to at this exact moment?

Similarly, what threats might you unknowingly welcome into your own life and into our church community by adopting a mindset that teaching on topics or struggles is always someone else's problem?

9. What should characterize your approach to these topics so that you faithfully examine your own heart while graciously encouraging and exhorting your fellow believers? See the following passages for some guidance: Gal. 6:1-2; James 5:16; Matt. 18:15-17; Heb. 10:24-25; Rom. 15:1-2; Eph. 4:15-16; 1 Thess. 5:14

We might expect Paul to omit the thanksgiving given the state of the church. Instead, he celebrates God's grace in their midst, though we should not miss that the accent falls on the grace of God, not on the virtue of the Corinthians. Remarkably, Paul is thankful for the spiritual gifts in the community (1:7), even though we see from chapters 12–14 that the church's understanding and practice of the gifts were askew. Also, in the thanksgiving Paul reminds and assures the Corinthians that the grace which called them will sustain them until the end (1:8–9). Such a promise is quite fascinating when we consider the severe warnings that crop up in the letter (e.g. 6:9–11; 9:24 – 10:22).³

- 10. Even in the case of such a dysfunctional and sputtering church, Paul's initial prayer of thankfulness is centered around the qualities of God rather than those of the Corinthian believers. In this short passage, what are the various ways Paul affirms God's work in their midst?**

What are some various ways you have seen God's work in your own life? How about in the lives of others you know in our church?

- 11. What attributes or qualities of God are called to attention in this passage?**

What attributes or qualities of God have been called to attention in your life in recent days?

³ Schreiner, Thomas R.. 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Book 7) (pp. 93–94). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

Paul first attacked the serious problem of defilement in the church, yet he said nothing about the problem itself. Instead, he took the positive approach and reminded the believers of their high and holy position in Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:1–9, he described the church that God sees; in 1 Corinthians 1:10–31, he described the church that men see. What we are in Jesus Christ positionally ought to be what we practice in daily life, but often we fail. Note the characteristics of the church because of our holy calling in Jesus Christ.

- Set apart by God (vv. 1-3)
- Enriched by God's grace (vv. 4-6)
- Expecting Jesus to return (v. 7)
- Depending on God's faithfulness (vv. 8-9)⁴

12. If a friend who wasn't a believer were to ask you to describe the church, how would you describe the church to them? What would be the defining characteristics?

13. Consider the things that Paul highlights about the church in Corinth here in this passage. Why are these characteristics so significant in Paul's view of the Church?

⁴ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Wise (1 Corinthians): Discern the Difference Between Man's Knowledge and God's Wisdom (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 20). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

- 14. As we study the book of 1 Corinthians under the heading of “Firing on all Cylinders”, take a moment to look up other biblical characteristics of the church. After reflecting on how the Bible speaks about the identity of the Church, how does this impact your affection and appreciation for the church you are part of today?**

Throughout this series, we'll discover how God's Word addresses issues of church unity, spiritual gifts, sexual immorality, marriage and divorce, church discipline, rights and freedoms for believers, issues surrounding worship, the significance of the resurrection, and generosity to highlight a few. These issues highlight the practical and even theological concerns Paul had for the Corinthian church, all of which are still relevant in contemporary churches today.

- 15. What is one area of your faith that you hope to develop and grow in throughout this study in 1 Corinthians?**



United, Not Divided

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Life is hard, especially when you and your wife are not on the same page. I know this from experience! I remember one year for Stephanie's birthday, I got her a beautiful orchid planted in a cup. I thought it was a great gift, but Stephanie did not agree. She was nice about it, but she couldn't hide the disappointment on her face. Then she asked me how much money I spent on ordering it...let's just say that I shouldn't have told her! We were not of the "same mind" when it came to that birthday gift.

Relational disagreements and divisions can do great damage to a church. The situation can start off relatively minor with a couple of people involved, but can quickly grow like a raging wildfire that destroys relationships and ultimately the church's testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth and appeals for them to be united. Paul had heard about the quarreling that was going on, and these divisions did not reflect the nature of Christ. Christ is not divided, and His people should not be either!

BREAK THE ICE

It's time to settle the debate once and for all. Apple or Android? GO!

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

EXPLORE IT

1. On what basis did Paul appeal to the Corinthian believers? (1:10)
2. Why did Paul ask the Corinthians to agree with one another? (1:10)
3. What specific problems were the Corinthian Christians having? (1:11-12)
4. How was Paul a part of the Corinthians' problems? (1:13-17)
5. What can result from preaching the gospel with "words of human wisdom"? (1:17)
6. What did Christ send Paul to do? (1:17)

APPLY IT

"I remember a few years ago being at a family congress in St. Louis, Missouri, when one of the evening speakers was Dr. Oswald Hoffman, the very capable and powerful preacher on the Lutheran Hour radio program. He was introduced in a rather extended and flowery way, but he came on and in his great, booming voice said, "I'm not Dr. Oswald Hoffman, the great preacher of the Lutheran Hour. I'm nobody, just like you!" I've not forgotten that incident because it seems to me to capture the very attitude Paul is describing here. Who are we, that we should put our interests and our desires ahead of that of the Lord for his church? I have been in many places where they were having church fights and almost invariably the thing that gives away that a church is in trouble is when people start talking about "my church," not in the sense that is perfectly proper as meaning, "The church where I go," but leaders of the church actually saying, "This is our church," and telling other people they have no rights to do something because the church belongs to them. They forget, of course, that the church never belongs to anybody but the Lord. This is what Paul uses as the basis for unity in this church -- not only the attitude of selflessness, which is the mind of Christ, but the responsibility to submit to his Lordship, the common responsibility that we have together."⁵

- 7. Compare verse 10 with Philippians 2:2. What do you see in these two passages? How do Christians come to "one mind" if they've been earnestly disagreeing? Is it ok to "agree to disagree"?**

- 8. Paul talks about the factions in the Corinthian church. What are factions? Why are they so damaging to a local church? How do you see them in modern churches?**

- 9. How does Paul use the unity of Christ and his Body as a strong argument against factions, against following specific leaders against other leaders?**

⁵ Sermon Excerpt from Ray Stedman. Found at: <https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/1-corinthians/behind-divisions>

“He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.” *1 Corinthians 1:2*

10. Consider the disagreements you have observed within the body of Christ. How would seeing ourselves and one another as holy help with conflict resolution?

“Paul then expresses his disdain for the Corinthians’ practice by saying he is glad that he baptized only a few people because it means no one can claim him for their side ([1 Cor. 1:14–16](#)). In effect, he says, “I am glad you cannot associate me with this nonsense,” which must have had quite an impact on the Corinthians. This leads Paul to state that Christ sent him not to baptize but to preach the gospel—not with eloquence in order not to empty the cross of its power (v. 17). Paul does not mean he had no mandate to baptize, but he is pointing out that the real source of power for Christians is the power of the cross. Furthermore, Paul is not saying that eloquent preaching is wrong. The New Testament is filled with eloquent preaching (for example, the book of Hebrews). Instead, as John Calvin comments, we are to commend the eloquence that “has no tendency to lead Christians to be taken up with an outward glitter of words, or intoxicate them with empty delight, or tickle their ears with its tinkling sound, or cover over the cross of Christ with its empty show as with a veil.”

John Calvin also comments on this passage that we should esteem eloquent speech that “tends to call us back to the native simplicity of the gospel.” It is not wrong for our preachers to be well-spoken or to write carefully crafted sermons. The problem comes when speaking is an end in itself and seeks to impress us with rhetoric instead of the cross. Let us encourage our pastors to proclaim the cross.”⁶

11. What role do humility and servant leadership play in mitigating the potential divisive impact of strong personalities in the church, and how can church leaders cultivate these qualities within themselves and their congregations?

⁶ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/the-source-of-power>

12. At Village Bible Church, we have a unique situation with multiple campuses led by different pastors who all have different teaching strategies and styles. How might Paul's concern about "Christ being divided" have immediate, practical applications within the context of Village Bible Church?

13. How can the desire for eloquence and impressive presentations sometimes contribute to divisions within the church, and what steps can we take to ensure the gospel remains central in our ministry?

“You may come into contact with two church members who have had a falling out. Perhaps one has sinned against the other and is denying it. You can speak to the one who has been sinned against and open up Proverbs 19:11 to remind that person, “It is the glory of a man to overlook an offense.” Can you overlook this offense—can you set it aside and continue to relate to that person as if it never happened? If not, then you can take that person to Matthew 18:15 and help him understand the process God gives us to resolve conflict: Go to that person alone, describe the offense, and see if they will ask your forgiveness; if not, take one or two other people and do it again; and if even then they won’t repent, take it to the church.

Of course maybe it’s you who needs to obey God when he says, “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Would it be said of you that you live at peace with everyone?

In these ways and so many others, you can imitate God by serving as a peacemaker. You can bring peace between man and man.”⁷

14. Have you ever been a part of a church that had such strong disagreements and divisions that it led to the church splitting? Without naming the church or those involved what were the issues that caused the church to divide?

15. Quarreling in the church is divisive and it detracts from the Church’s mission. Knowing this to be true, how can you seek to be a peacemaker in your church with the people around you?

⁷ <https://www.challies.com/articles/being-a-peacemaker/>



Wise Fools

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Sophomore year. High school or college, it doesn't really matter. You are no longer at the beginning, you have gained some important knowledge, but therein lies the trap. It's literally in the meaning of the word "sophomore". Two Greek words: *Sophos*—wisdom, and *moros*—fool. Wise fool.

We've all been there; we know enough to get ourselves into trouble. The little knowledge we have can easily go to our heads and we can find ourselves off course. We wind up saying and believing things that are, upon further reflection, not just wrong, but completely out of bounds, even evil.

Sometimes we become wise fools because we don't do our homework, sometimes because we follow the crowd or the charismatic leader. Sometimes it's because we don't want to seem or feel dumb. And sometimes it's because we let the cultural influences of our time and space lead us away from the central reality of our faith.

For the Corinthian church, it seems that *E. All of the above*, is the correct answer. Paul has greeted the church and thanked God for them. He has recounted the blessings of God on them and the gifts that they have. Yet, as we saw last week, they are a divided church. Rivalries have developed based on which leader is being followed, by who has been baptized by whom. They have allowed what should be spiritual matters to divide them, a situation that is at once preposterous and unfortunately all too common even today.

BREAK THE ICE

Share something that you were once absolutely convinced was true but now look back on and laugh about because you realize it was preposterous.

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

EXPLORE IT

1. What does Paul contrast?
2. What do the Jews and Greeks demand?
3. What should we boast?
4. Why didn't Paul preach with persuasive words?
5. Is there anything from this passage that struck you in a way that you had not considered before?

APPLY IT

No one likes to feel dumb. No one likes to feel helpless. The first section of this passage, verses 18-25, contrasts the central message of Christianity with our tendency to look for wisdom and power in the things of this world. The central message of Christianity is the cross. The death of Jesus. Certainly when Paul says “the cross” in verse 17 and verse 18, he is including the burial and resurrection of Jesus as well (this will be seen clearly later in the book in passages like 1 Cor. 15), but there is an important emphasis here that can be easy for modern readers to miss. Today crosses are worn as jewelry, are hung on walls, put on tombs, and much more. In the first century this would never have happened. Universally the cross was a symbol of suffering and shame in a way that is hard for us to understand. Jewish law said that death on a tree meant the curse (damnation) of God (Deut. 21:23). The Romans used crucifixion as an intentionally cruel and horrible death usually for hardened criminals and rebels. The Roman orator and statesman Cicero said “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.”⁸ So the idea that a king, and more specifically a divine king would die on a cross was more than foolish, it was shameful, a scandal (v. 23, stumbling block is from the Greek skandalon which is where the word scandal comes from).

Verse 19 quotes Is. 29:14, in which God calls out His own people, people who are planning an alliance because it seems like a politically expedient thing to do. It seemed the wise thing to do, but the alliance itself led to Assyria’s invasion. God, in His wisdom, overcomes ours. The Corinthian church, made up of both Jewish and Gentile converts, had divided among themselves, including in ways that would be natural for both. The wise man, possibly a philosopher; the scribe, probably an expert in Jewish law; the debater, probably one trained in rhetoric who was very popular in Corinthian society and liked to argue and gain followers. All three seem wise “in this age.” They reflect the deep structures that shape us culturally. Jews defined themselves by the signs that God had done (most notably in the Exodus), power for a powerless people was crucial. Likewise, the Greeks had defined themselves by wisdom, but Corinth had been destroyed and rebuilt a Roman colony. Gaining power seemed wise to the Jews, wisdom to a people who wanted to maintain cultural, if not legal status, but neither avenue could actually deliver. The cross, foolishness, is wiser and stronger than human wisdom and power.

6. Are you more drawn to signs or wisdom? Why do you think that is?

7. How can knowing the dual nature of the “word of the cross” (folly and power) help you as you engage friends, neighbors, and even a culture who sees the cross as foolish?

⁸ Quoted in David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2003), 61.

8. The members of the Corinthian church had been captured by the deep and defining beliefs of the cultures without even realizing it. What are ways that you can be susceptible to the same kinds of things? How can you avoid the trap?

In the second section of this passage, Paul focuses on reminding the people of Corinth about who they were, and who they were wasn't much. Corinth was a Roman colony in a rebuilt Greek city. The Romans had destroyed it and rebuilt it about a hundred years later. Many of the Roman colonists were freedmen (former slaves) and were looked down upon by other Romans even though they had citizenship (with restrictions). By the time of Paul, almost 100 years later, Corinth was rich and multiethnic, but the desire to be somebody was still significant. NT Wright reminds us that we are not so different:

The world is full of 'somebodies' and 'nobodies', it does neither of them any good. That's not the way God intended it to be. Every human being, man, woman, child, and even unborn child, bears the image and likeness of God, and has neither more nor less dignity because some other people have heard of them, look up to them or think they're special. But in most parts of the world, at most periods of history – and as the story shows, often in the church itself – people feel that it's better to be 'somebody'. The cult of fame has reached monstrous proportions in recent days, to the absurd point where many people are now famous for being famous. We know their names, we recognize their faces, but can't remember whether they are footballers, film stars or fashion models. Or perhaps even archbishops.⁹

A Few of the Corinthian believers had social standing (Erastus, city treasurer according to Rom. 16:23), but not many. This has been his pattern all along. In Deuteronomy (especially ch. 7), God's people are reminded that he didn't choose them because they were "somebody", but precisely in spite of that fact. God has not changed in that regard.

In verse 31, Paul quotes Jeremiah 9:24, and given the argument he is making, also refers to verse 23:

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

⁹ NT Wright, *1 Corinthians for Everyone*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 10.

Paul is making a clear allusion because he is not saying that wisdom is unimportant, rather, that having the right kind of wisdom is crucial. Again, Wright explains:

Time and again, Paul quotes the phrase ‘the Lord’ from the Old Testament, where the word refers directly to YHWH, Israel’s God, and makes it refer to Jesus the Messiah. So it is here. He is the one ‘in whom’ Christians possess all the wisdom they need. . . .

The biblical theme which Paul is drawing on here is the theme of ‘Wisdom’. In the book of Proverbs . . . we find Wisdom as a person, the one through whom the world was made, inviting humans to discover who she is [in Proverbs, Wisdom is a woman] and so to become the genuine human beings they were meant to be. . . . For Paul, Jesus the Messiah is the true wisdom (see, e.g., Colossians 1:15-20 and 2:1-3). Having him – or rather, being ‘in him’ – means that you are a genuine human being at last, called to live by God’s wisdom rather than that of the world.¹⁰

9. How does Paul’s reminder of the worldly insignificance of the people of Corinth confront our contemporary drive for status and recognition?

10. In what ways do you feel the pull of status in your own life (and your family’s)?

¹⁰ Wright, 12,13.

11. Given that many of the Corinthian believers had no status, and that God specifically called them, what could that imply for the kinds of people we as a church should reach out to?

12. How can “boasting in the Lord” remind us to seek true wisdom?

Paul moves from the foolishness of the cross, to God’s use of “foolish” and weak people to show his power and wisdom. Finally, Paul moves on to his own ministry in Corinth. In 2:1-5, Paul shows that he was not opposed to wisdom or even learning, rather, that his ministry was intentional in using God’s wisdom. Paul says that he “decided” on his approach (v.2). Why would Paul choose to approach the Corinthians, without the trappings that mattered in Corinth? Why weakness, fear, and trembling? Pastor Andrew Wilson writes:

One of the puzzles of 1 Corinthians is that Paul repeatedly insists that he did not use eloquence or “wise and persuasive words” (v 4), yet the letter is full of some of the most powerful and eloquent rhetoric in the whole of Scripture. . . . But his point is not that using language well is bad or that he never does it himself. His point is that using language well is bad if it detracts from or substitutes for the message of Christ crucified. . . . Paul’s priority is a demonstration of the Spirit’s power (2:4), which in context refers to the preaching of the cross rather than the signs and wonders that some people might expect. This narrow focus is the heart of Paul’s missionary strategy, and he is crystal clear as to why: “so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power (v 5). Again, what you win people with is what you win people to.”¹¹

Paul is wise beyond the cultural expectations of first century Corinth or 21st century America. His wisdom is the wisdom of knowing God, not of knowing things or gaining earthly power with the words that he uses. God’s foolishness is beyond the wisdom of human understanding. Romans 1 tells us that our reason has been corrupted because of our choices, and so he uses what seems foolish to us to bring us to himself.

¹¹ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, (The Good Book Company, 2023), 25,26.

13. In a world of charismatic leaders and celebrity preachers, how should Paul's example help us in evaluating who we listen to and how we choose churches?
14. If true wisdom is knowing Jesus Christ and him crucified, what practices can you add or deepen as a regular part of your life?
15. What does Paul's humility say about the way we should approach both our learning and speaking about knowing God?



FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

1 Corinthians

The War Of Wisdoms

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

In 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, Paul introduces us to a profound concept: God's wisdom versus the world's wisdom. This can be likened to the classic "War of the Worlds" story where two vastly different forces collide. In our lives, we often find ourselves caught in a similar conflict—a war of wisdoms. The world's wisdom, which relies on human intellect and societal norms, clashes with the divine wisdom that comes from God. Paul reminds us that God's wisdom is a mystery, hidden from the rulers of this age, and only revealed through the Holy Spirit. This wisdom isn't about intellectual prowess or worldly success; it's about understanding God's purposes and aligning our lives with His will. Imagine facing a decision and not just relying on your logic or advice from others but accessing divine insight directly from the Creator.

Think about the daily choices we make at work, school, or home. We often rely on our understanding, experiences, or popular opinions. But Paul challenges us to seek a higher perspective. When we pray for guidance and immerse ourselves in Scripture, we invite the Holy Spirit to reveal God's wisdom to us. This doesn't always mean we'll get a clear, audible answer. Sometimes, it's a gentle nudge in our spirit, a sense of peace about a decision, or a timely word from a friend that aligns with God's truth. In my own life, I see this need for divine wisdom in many areas—whether it's navigating the challenges and joys of marriage with Amanda, making decisions in parenting our three boys, or seeking direction for my catering business.

However, when we rely solely on worldly wisdom, we can easily stray from God's path. Proverbs 14:12 warns, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death." Without God's wisdom, our decisions may seem right in the moment but ultimately lead to negative consequences. James 3:15-17 contrasts earthly wisdom, which is "unspiritual, demonic," with wisdom from above, which is "pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." Living in worldly wisdom often means making decisions based on immediate gratification, self-interest, and societal approval. It can look like prioritizing career success over family time, chasing material wealth at the expense of spiritual health, or conforming to societal pressures rather than standing firm in biblical truth. Such a path may bring temporary satisfaction but ultimately leads to confusion, conflict, and a lack of true fulfillment.

Having the "mind of Christ" means thinking and acting as Jesus would. It's about humility, love, and obedience to God. When faced with a difficult colleague or customer at work, instead of reacting with frustration, I strive to respond with patience and understanding. When making decisions for our church family at Village or interacting with neighbors in my hometown of Hinckley, Illinois, I try to consider how my actions reflect God's love and truth. This shift in perspective transforms our everyday actions into acts of worship and service.

Lastly, let's remember that we are not alone in this journey. As a community of believers, we can support each other in seeking and applying God's wisdom. Sharing our experiences, praying for one another, and studying the Bible together can help us grow in our spiritual understanding. Let's commit to making room in our daily routines for the Holy Spirit's guidance, trusting that as we seek God's wisdom, He will faithfully lead us in His perfect path. Whether we're dealing with challenges at home, in our businesses, or within our church and community, God's wisdom is available to guide us every step of the way.

BREAK THE ICE

If you could go back in time and talk with your 17 year old self, what piece of advice would you be sure to share?

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

EXPLORE IT

1. According to verses 6-8, what kind of wisdom is Paul speaking about, and how is it different from the wisdom of this age?
2. In verse 9, Paul quotes Scripture. What does this quote tell us about God's wisdom and revelation?
3. How does Paul describe the role of the Holy Spirit in verses 10-12?
4. In verses 14-16, what distinction does Paul make between the "natural" person and the "spiritual" person?

APPLY IT

Underline one word in this passage and pay special attention to it because Paul repeats it four times. It's the word "wisdom."

There is the "message of wisdom" that Paul shared with others.

There is the "wisdom of this age" that really is no wisdom at all.

There is God's "secret wisdom" that is really "hidden wisdom" that the world has never understood and does not understand now.

Wisdom comes from one of two places—God or the world. God's wisdom leads us in one direction, while the world's wisdom leads us in another direction. God's wisdom and the world's wisdom stand forever at odds with each other. You can have one or the other, but you can't really have both at the same time. This principle explains so much that happens around us. It tells us why unbelievers think like they do, and it helps us understand why they sometimes ridicule what we believe. Put simply, they lack the true wisdom that comes from God.¹²

5. How have you seen the contrast between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom play out in your own life or the lives of those around you?

6. In light of Paul's description of God's wisdom" versus the world's wisdom, how can we discern when societal norms or cultural trends align with God's wisdom versus when they conflict with it? Can you think of recent examples where this distinction became evident?

¹² Sermon Notes by Ray Pritchard found @ <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2003-10-26-what-the-world-doesnt-know/>

Verse 6: We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not **the wisdom of this age** or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.

Well, when is this age? Essentially, he's talking about the entirety of human history beginning with the fall of Adam and Eve into sin and the beginning in Genesis 3:6. Humanity first relied upon its own wisdom and rejected God's wisdom at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Genesis 3:4-6, Eve's looking at that tree and sees that its fruit was to be desired to make one wise. She rejected God's wisdom and God's knowledge and instead ate some fruit and then gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate as well.

Since that point on, all the way to the end of time, is this age. It's the age that is characterized by a rejection of God's wisdom. A fundamental turning away from God's wisdom to human wisdom that is entirely fundamentally completely unlike God. Who is like God? No one. Which is why you can't rely on the wisdom of this age.¹³

7. Can you identify a story from the Bible that illustrates someone following Godly wisdom and another where someone followed worldly wisdom? What principles or lessons from these narratives can we apply to our lives to guide our decision-making and actions today?

8. How does choosing worldly wisdom over Godly wisdom reflect a deeper rejection of God and His Word? What factors or characteristics make worldly wisdom attractive and appealing in our culture and personal lives, despite its divergence from biblical principles?

¹³ Sermon Notes from Jacob Gerber found @ <https://harvestpca.org/sermons/sermon-the-spiritual-wisdom-of-god-1-corinthians-26-16/>

The Jewish and Roman leaders didn't know God, for if they had, 'they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' This is the apex of showing that man's wisdom can't know God. Brilliant Romans and educated, well-known Jews schooled in the Old Testament together crucified Christ. That shows how much they really knew--they didn't know anything! I love the way Paul calls Him "the Lord of glory" in contrast to the humiliation of crucifixion. The leaders crucified the Lord of glory. This shows how far off human wisdom was from the truth. The Romans, with all their gods and religions, didn't know God. The Jewish people, with all their information, didn't know God. The Roman and Jewish leaders crucified Him.¹⁴

- 9. Compare and contrast the responses of the irreligious Romans and the deeply religious Jews to Jesus. How did their different backgrounds and motivations lead them to the same tragic conclusion of crucifying Jesus?**

- 10. Paul helps answer a common question for believers: "How can I know if I have the wisdom of God?" He does this by connecting God's wisdom to knowing Christ. Why is it impossible for anyone, including leaders and intellectuals, to understand God's secret and hidden wisdom apart from Christ?**

¹⁴ Sermon Notes from John F. MacArthur found @ <https://www.gty.org/library/study-guides/110/the-foolishness-of-god>

God's wisdom, as described in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, is the eternal and profound plan of God, predestined before time and hidden from natural understanding. Revealed by the Holy Spirit to those with the mind of Christ, it centers on Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, contrasting sharply with the transient and physical thinking of the world. Biblical wisdom calls for a life that is in harmony with both the created order and God's redemptive work, transitioning from the Old Testament's focus on the fear of the Lord to the New Testament's focus on Christ's life and ministry. This wisdom is grounded in the Bible, focused on eternal and spiritual matters, guiding believers to align their lives with God's eternal purposes.

James 3:13-18

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

11. By using the definition above and the words of James 3:13-18, Would you say that you are living within the wisdom of God? Why or why not?

Ray Pritchard in his sermon tells us four important truths about the Holy Spirit and the believer¹⁵:

- *The Holy Spirit reveals the truth of God to us. That's verse 10. To "reveal" means to make clear that which was previously hidden or unknown. The Holy Spirit "turns on the lights" for us so that we can see the truth of God. And if the Holy Spirit did not "turn on the lights" for us, we would still be in the darkness...*
- *The Holy Spirit can reveal the truth of God to us because he knows the mind of God infallibly. That's verse 11. Paul argues by analogy from the lesser to the greater. Even among people who know each other very well, communication is difficult at best... The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God because the Holy Spirit is God. He searches out the "deep things" of God. Nothing is hidden from him. Because he knows the mind of God, he can communicate the truth about God to us. Nothing is lost in translation...*
- *The Holy Spirit enables us to understand the message of the gospel. That's verse 12. Note the phrase, "what God has freely given us." That refers to all that Jesus Christ accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection from the dead. Because of the Holy Spirit, we can understand the true meaning of the cross. Apart from the Spirit, the message of the cross will be lost to us.*

¹⁵Sermon notes by Ray Pritchard found @ <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/how-we-know-what-we-know/>

The Holy Spirit teaches us what to say when we witness to others. That's verse 13. When Paul says, "This is what we speak," he is probably referring not just to himself or the other apostles, but to all Christians. We do not follow the world's wisdom in the way we proclaim the gospel. That is, we reject manipulation, dishonesty, flattery, intimidation, and all other worldly methods. Instead, we plainly speak the truth of the gospel to anyone who will listen.

- 12. Take a moment and read through the four "wisdom works" of the Holy Spirit. Which work of the Spirit are you most thankful for and which one is unknown or confusing to you?**

- 13. Notice the final work of the Spirit: He empowers and guides us to share this wisdom with others. Who in your life needs to hear this Godly wisdom, and how are you making it known to them?**

The cards are stacked against us!

If our message is true wisdom from God, why doesn't everyone recognize it and believe it? Or said another way, if the gospel is true, why aren't all the churches filled to overflowing every time the doors are open? That's the \$64,000 question.

The final section of Chapter 2 gives us the answer. Paul explains that there is a great divide in the human race. The fundamental division of the human race is not based on race, gender, age, physical appearance, skin color or ethnic background. The things that so greatly divide us don't seem to matter to God.

Everyone in the world is in one of two groups. Paul calls one group "the natural man," the other group he calls "the spiritual man." Everyone reading these words is either "natural" or "spiritual." There is no third category.

14. How does Paul's distinction between the "natural" and "spiritual" man help us understand the varied responses to the gospel message? In what ways can this insight guide our approach to evangelism?

15. Reflect on your own journey from being a "natural" person to becoming a "spiritual" person. What changed for you to move from being natural to spiritual?

There are four key words in verse 14—and the last one is the most important: accept ... foolishness ... understand ... discern. The word "discern" is a legal term from the first-century that refers to the ability of a wise and experienced judge to sift through mountains of testimony to reach the proper verdict. There is legal discernment (in the courtroom) and there is spiritual discernment (in life itself). This sort of discernment is the ability to properly "translate" the message of the gospel so you can understand it and believe it. Because the "natural man" (a term that really means "the unsaved") lacks that inner "translator," he never comes to the right conclusion about the gospel. It remains foolishness in his eyes.

- 16. In light of the state of sinners, why is prayer for them so important and what things should we be praying for in light of this fallen condition?**

We have the mind of Christ. What does that mean practically? It means that more and more every day we want to think like Jesus. We can think like Jesus, like his word, as we meditate on his word. Now it all starts to make sense. Psalm 1:1, "Blessed is the one who meditates on his law day and night and finds delight in it." Yes, because the more we meditate on his word, the more our minds are conformed to his mind, our thoughts conformed to his thoughts, and the more we begin to live according to the life that he's designed for us to live. His life becomes our life. His mind, our mind. His heart, our heart. His desires, our desires. His love, our love. This is union with Jesus, so live in it today.

- 17. In what area of your life do you desire the mind of Christ? Spend time in prayer asking God to give you his mind in this particular area.**